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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
Friday, September 15, 2006

PACT English Language Arts scores show improvement; challenges remain

Editor's Note: Palmetto Achievement Challenge Test (PACT) results were released by the South Carolina Department of Education this morning at 10:00 a.m. PACT is given to South Carolina students in grades 3-8 in four subject areas: English Language Arts, Math, Social Studies, and Science. Results can be found on the SDE's website at www.ed.sc.gov.

Thumbnail sketches of 2006 district PACT scores for grades 3-8, and charts showing historical PACT performance in each subject area tested are available online at www.sceoc.org, under "In The News".

Columbia – The percentage of students well-prepared for work at the next grade level in English Language Arts (ELA) is increasing, according to 2006 Palmetto Achievement Challenge Test (PACT) scores released today. Thirty-five percent of students in grades 3-8 scored Proficient or Advanced on the ELA portion of this year's test, the highest percentage in eight years.

With the exception of third and eighth grade, the percent of students scoring Proficient or Advanced in PACT ELA increased for each grade level tested from 2005 scores. Forty-two percent of fourth graders scored Proficient or Advanced, a five percentage point increase from 2005 scores.

Four performance levels are established for state's assessment to reflect the knowledge and skills exhibited by students: Advanced, Proficient, Basic, and Below Basic. A score of Proficient means a student is prepared to succeed at the next grade level and meets federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) performance expectations.

PACT Math scores remained relatively flat, compared to 2005. Thirty-three percent of students scored Proficient or Advanced in Math in 2005 and 2006. However, the percentage of students scoring Proficient or Advanced has improved 17 percentage points since 1999.

“Overall, we are pleased with the improvements seen in ELA this year. Reading is the foundation for success in all subject areas. Our studies demonstrate that reading proficiency can directly affect on-time graduation rate and overall academic achievement,” said EOC Executive Director Dr. Jo Anne Anderson.

A February 2005 EOC study showed an almost one-to-one correlation between reading proficiency as measured on PACT in the eighth grade and on-time graduation rates four years later. The study provided the basis for an EOC public awareness partnership with the state’s daily newspapers, [Parents and Adults Inspiring Reading Success \(PAIRS\)](#).

“The bottom-line is if a student cannot read on a proficient level in the eighth grade, it is a coin toss whether or not he will graduate on time four years later,” Anderson said.

Additionally, Anderson stresses the need to make certain all students are academically stronger as they advance through their careers. PACT results show students are losing ground in some areas. In ELA for example, 55 percent of third graders scored Proficient or Advanced on PACT. The percentage drops as the grades go up. In grade four, the percentage of students meeting expectations drops to 42 percent; grade five: 34 percent; grade six: 31 percent; and only a quarter of South Carolina’s seventh and eighth graders scored Proficient or Advanced on the ELA portion of PACT.

“This downward trend concerns us because students are entering high school unprepared for the curriculum,” stated Anderson.

PACT scores in Science and Social Studies remain low, a finding that Anderson says is “unexpected.” Twenty-seven percent of students scored Proficient or Advanced on the Social Studies portion of the PACT and 25 percent in Science, representing an increase of less than a point for both subject areas from 2005 scores.

Minimal progress is seen in reducing the achievement gap at the Proficient and Advanced level between students of different ethnic and socioeconomic groups, particularly in Social Studies and Science. With few exceptions, reductions in the achievement gap are observed when PACT performance goes *down* for the historically higher-scoring group.

“We can’t accept this trend as a way of closing the achievement gap,” stated Anderson. “The challenge before is to raise the achievement of lower income and minority students while maintaining the high levels of achievement of economically advantaged students.”

This year’s scores again point to the challenges faced by students in the middle grades, typically student in grades six through eight. In all subject areas, performance among students in the middle grades is lower than their counterparts in the elementary grades, typically grades three

through five. For example, 27 percent of middle grade students scored Proficient or Advanced on the ELA portion of the 2006 PACT, compared to 43 percent of elementary school students.

The EOC continues to be concerned with the performance of students as they transition through the grades and into different school levels. In March 2006, the EOC released [Caught Between the Lines: South Carolina's Students in the Middle](#), a publication which examines middle school students in terms of demographics, health, as well as outside influences such as risk behaviors, student activities, character and ethics, and family relationships.

“Young people in the middle grades are beginning to face a myriad of issues—risk taking behaviors are on the rise and peer groups become influencers on the lives of these children who are often taking on big, life responsibilities,” stated Dr. Anderson. “All of these factors can negatively influence the academic achievement of students.”

Anderson points to the recently enacted Education and Economic Development Act (EEDA) that furthers attention on the middle grades through integration of career planning in the guidance curriculum.

“It is critical to begin to meet the needs of each student at each stage in their academic career and remain focused on each student achieving long-term school and life success,” stated Anderson.

Established by the EAA, the EOC is an independent, non-partisan, 18-member legislative committee made up of educators, business persons, and elected officials who serve by virtue of their elected position or by appointment of the legislature or governor. It bears responsibilities for the development and improvement of SC's educational accountability system and for making recommendations to ensure the continuous improvement of schools.